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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an agency working with children, teenagers, and families in inner-city St. Louis neighborhoods. Its programs included all the social work specializations--casework, community development, and group work--which interacted in a holistic approach. Poverty was one common denominator among all the neighborhoods served. Youth clubs organized on the playgrounds helped individuals develop social skills, community knowledge, and an eventual respect for the property and equipment. Trust relationships were developed between staff and youth through day and residential camp programs. In these summer programs, staff labored to counteract the impact of racial prejudice. While negative behavior was present, positive behaviors and relationships were encouraged. Camp participants and staff gathered before the camp session in order to facilitate bonding and anticipate and reduce problems. The camp was portrayed to the students as something they did by choice as an enjoyable learning experience. Campers were encouraged to identify with their cabin groups and were given choices of daytime activities, including crafts, music, and drama. Field games and special evening activities were part of the program. Effort was made to keep rules and consequences logical and fair. Of thousands of campers involved during 40 years of observation, less than 20 had to go home early. Lessons of sharing and cooperation were used to combat social programming that said: "everyone is corrupt," "there is no justice or opportunity for black people," and "I can do as I please." (TES)

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1989 NATIONAL CONFERENCE

AMERICAN CAMPING ASSOCIATION

"Making Camps Work for the Challenging Camper"

Louis V. Huber

CAMPING WITH SPECIAL PERSONS:

Introduction:

Our camping adventures evolved from our work with the United Church Neighborhood Houses in the inner-city of St. Louis, Missouri. The agency was solidly committed to serving people. We were encouraged to examine our motives so that we would not let personal needs stand in the way of concerns for the needs of our members. We wanted to be professional throughout our practice, but we did not want that to result in aloofness or being impersonal in any way. We cared deeply for the persons in our programs anddid our best to project this concern and investment.

Wholistic Programming:

Our programs were varied. They included all of the social work specializations: casework, community development, and group work. They all interacted, and the end result was a wholistic approach.

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Settlements are noted for their multifaceted programs in targeted neighborhoods, and we ran true to form. If a child was absent from school on an extended basis, the staff called on his home to offer to be of assistance. Tutoring, personal counseling, psychiatric evaluation, material relief, provision of carfare or whatever seemed indicated, was incorporated into the approach.

Emphasis on Social Group Work:

We were on the staff for forty years. We were able to perceive the evolution of the agency's services. An emphasis on group services seemed to find center stage almost from the very beginning. It achieved goal fulfillment more adequately than the other techniques. It provided a means of informally relating to all age groups. It provided a means of developing caring relationships between staff and group members, and between the members themselves. It also made it possible to teach values which seemed essential to survival, and to a more creative existence for the members. At the very least, it provided an alternative to some of the solutions the young people were quickly adapting as their own.

Poverty the Major Negative:

The neighborhoods which we served had several common denominators, but the major one was poverty. It affected behavior in

destructive ways. Competition was usually high for everything -- play space, jobs, health care, affection, and almost everything else. Food was scarce and diets lacked nutrition. Police were aggressive and hurtful. Families were large and disorganized. Housing was oppressive, unsanitary and expensive. Clinics were overcrowded, understaffed, and impersonal. Schools were uninspired and usually uncreative. Families were matriarchal, many times loving, but lacking in stability.

We usually referred to our clients as "neighbors", so as to keep from thinking of our members as clients.

Nature of the Youth Served:

We organized club groups on the playgrounds, at the schools, and through door-to-door recruitment. This was only initially; in the later years we announced registration and the response was greater than we could provide leadership for. The children and youth who responded were exciting, even the most acting-out, hostile, aggressive types, as well as the non-participating, passive persons. Most of the children were intelligent, sensitive people. They had almost no social skills or community knowledge, and their problem-solving was greatly dependent on the authority of physical power.

Their acquaintance with the responsibilities of ownership was very slight. Agency equipment was not treated with much respect until

many years had passed. Today most of the members perceive of the agency as theirs -- no broken windows, few stolen soccer balls, and no break-ins. It is seen as a positive force for good by most families. The neighborhood changed regularly to some extent, as some families moved to more favorable areas and new families moved in. Starting over with some families was always in the picture. There seemed to be a cadre of families that formed a continuing core.

The Essential Nature of Trust Relationships:

The club groups provided an opportunity for the staff to establish a trust relationship with the participants. It is important to note that no change in behavior or attitude takes place unless there is a genuine trust present between the parties involved. This happened as the group leaders earned the trust of their members by relating to them through the years. Summer vacation opened a new vista for building relationships and trust. We started day and residential camps. The latter became a bonanza in establishing strong trust relationships and effecting behavior and personality changes that were significant.

The staff had some previous camping experience, which helped, but the best was yet to come. We decided to start our first camping experience on an integrated basis with junior boys and girls. We prepared carefully, even to informing each parent of the inter-racial

nature of our camps. The one and only race riot St. Louis ever experienced came a few days before we were to leave for camp. The newspapers and radio had field days, but our parents were alarmed.

The staff met quickly and decided to proceed with the original plans. The board gave its approval, and we were off and running once more. We contacted each family, attempting to reassure them that their children would be safe and that this would be a good camp. They already knew some of the counselors from previous contact at the agency, and were aware of their competence. After the visits and calls were completed, not one parent had objected and the children were still eager. The first integrated camp from St. Louis became a reality at Camp Potawatomi, later to be renamed Camp Tambo (an acronym for "That All May Be One.")

The Impact of Segregation:

Integration was not a major problem at our camps, but the effects of segregation and racial bias were. We labored to counteract the impact of prejudice. Different racial composition occurred at each camp among the campers and the staff. The majority of the campers were black, and if they had any religious affiliation, it was Christian. The staff achieved a good balance racially by incorporating neighborhood persons. A given was that everyone was equal racially, and we worked from this premise. The families of the

children with whom we camped were victims of generations of deprivation. Some of the symptoms were well established in their lifestyles, attitudes and behavior. We never talked about "spilling" milk or other drinks, but we said we "wasted it." Diets of the families were almost absent of nicer cuts of meat, until food stamps appeared on the scene. Sometimes we overcompensated by requiring status clothes or jewelry, even garments that could only be dry-cleaned. Some of the children had never eaten with people other than members of their own race, or had never been more than a few miles from their own homes.

Behavior Norm:

We had to attempt to evaluate behavior on the basis of what was the expected norm developmentally for the young people, and then compare it to any additionally different responses. We concluded that the young people were fairly well within the limits of normally-developing youth. Their responses, although sometimes negative, were expected, and were justifiable. Our assignment was to sort out these responses, and build on the most favorable of them. Above all, we had to avoid being judgmental. It served no purpose for us to pronounce goodness or evil. We focused rather on the harm and/or hurt the act produced for the person or group involved. We leaned heavily on reducing the temptations (such as putting locks on our pianos),

encouraging positives with praise and recognition, explaining reasons for requirements, always verbalizing, but rarely lengthy, showing affection with attention to individuals through contact, touching, hugs, and by being present, all done as appropriate and acceptable by both parties, setting realistic limits and following them consistently, and by establishing sincere trust relationships with each individual.

Routine Practices:

There were some routine practices which we followed that had proven effective through the years. Some of the things that we did were elementary and preparatory to enabling the more creative growth and developmental kind of programming. Sometimes we referred to them as "mechanics," the methods we practiced to condition behavior in a manner which reduced negatives to the greatest extent possible. Before we left town for camp, and months earlier, if possible, we gathered the campers together for exposure to the excitement and expectations of the coming summer. For the new campers, we tried to build anticipation for the fun and joys to be shared with their peers. We were careful to explain the rules and schedules. In effect, we began the idea of covenant through this process. We established the agreement between the camper and the camp, the camper and the staff, and the camp with the camper. The staff-camp relationship was covered

at another time, even though it spelled out the expectations for staff with campers.

Program Anticipation:

Program was discussed; meal times, food quantity and quality, swimming, frequency, work, crafts, cook-outs, overnights, covered wagons, evening programs, rest hour, vespers, bedtimes and other aspects of camp were included. We tried to clarify the conditions of the contract. We stated that camping is not a vacation in the usual sense, but rather a learning experience which would be filled with achievement, new friends, happiness, and as with all growth and stretching, some pain and heartache would result. We always reminded the campers that attending a camp was their decision and that they needed to know the conditions of the covenant. They were told, "Your participation pleases us, but we do not want you to attend for our sakes alone." We explained that the staff chose to serve as counselors and support people because they cared about young people, but this was their professional calling and not their vacation either. "They enjoy being with you, but they are here as teachers, parent substitutes, guides, protectors, limiters and enablers," the campers were told. We explained further that coming to camp had to be the camper's decision, something they really wanted to do.

Alert to Group Living

We thought it was important to let the new campers know that they would be experiencing group living, and some of the plus and minus differences from their usual lifestyles. Some of the differences they would have to adjust to were regular eating times, kitchen duty with mucho silverware and piles of dishes, scheduled bedtimes and, except for cabin planned activities, a great deal of scheduling. They were told of the need to relate their behavior to the effect it had on the group. We were careful to reveal some of the joys of being part of a group as well. We stressed the friendships and esprit de corps that would take place. We did all of this fully realizing that no verbalization would make much sense until the young people directly experienced it at camp.

Prior Bonding:

The stronger the relationship with the child which exists before going to camp, the better. The bond between staff and child is very important. The quality of the camping experience can almost be predicted on the quality of the prior relationships. This is true for the staff contribution as well. If the staff member has an established relationship of a positive nature prior to serving at camp, he/she is more likely to do well. The problem is, however, that in many, if not most instances, neither the campers nor the staff

members are so fortunate. To overcome this, we did what we could. Almost all of our full-time staff wanted to participate in the camping program, and this, of course, made the continuing, consistent trust relationships more possible, and provided an easier transition.

Bonding New Staff:

The new summer staff members were given an invitation to assist with groups at the agency prior to summer, if they were residents of our city, or attending a school nearby. We also attempted to involve them in regular staff meetings, social functions and conferences. We pushed to get acquainted with the summer leaders by visiting them, corresponding, sharing resources, and having them meet some of the potential summer participants. The first week of summer was a teaching marathon, with some time time at camp, and there was always at least one day before each session to prepare for the new program. An important part of getting ready was to review each camper's background to familiarize the counselor with the camper. Our primary goal was to evaluate the degree of competency of each leader, so that we could make the assignments in a manner which would be most beneficial to the campers. One of the factors we found most frustrating was the fact that caring was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to teach.

Caring Difficult to Teach:

One of the factors we found most frustrating was the fact that caring was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to teach. We tried to teach program skills: songs, games, outdoor skills, crafts, and as many others as we had time for. We also provided all the details of the schedule to be followed at camp. Self-understanding and insight into camper behavior we determined we would cover in supervisory sessions with each leader during camp. Caring still remained a difficult thing to teach. We did all we knew to enhance caring. We tried to recognize it, to share the joys inherent in it, and to inspire it. We concluded that concerned people, for the most part, came to us with caring in place. We learned that counselors were more sensitive leaders if they received some satisfactions from their experiences, got adequate rest, time off, and that their campers did not continue to frustrate them.

Placement of Campers:

Before leaving for camp we examined the list of names of persons who were going to attend. A few children asked to share the same cabin. We took those requests into consideration, but retained the option not to comply if the arrangement provided problems. We tried to place the children in cabins according to their developmental age, rather than their chronological age. Some very young teenagers would

be asked to stay on as juniors for another year if they were not able to cope with the older group. Some teens were not included if their maturity level exceeded that of the group. Brothers or sisters were usually placed in different cabins. Cousins and other relatives were not so crucial. Male or female campers known to provide negative emotional or psychological supports for each other were also separated.

Staff were assigned according to their abilities. Requests were considered, but other factors were given importance as well. Training and experience were weighed, but proven productivity was given the greatest credence. The counselors who had proven ability to "love, limit, and help the campers achieve" were given the most challenging assignments. Capable counselors who could convey genuine investment and regard for their wards, hold to the highest expectations for them at the same time, and continue this throughout the sessions were limited gems. Staff members of this calibur were the primary ingredient of a successful camp. We tried never to use inadequate leaders, and never re-employ these persons.

Records:

Children with minor court records were taken to camp if no problem seemed to exist in reference to the safety of themselves or others. We tried to get the referral agencies to provide case

records, but in most instances they could have been more adequate. Each child received a summary evaluation from our staff after each session. It was made available to the parents and the agencies, if it seemed appropriate. Reports were not released if there were problems or concerns that required personal attention. The party or parties were called and a conference established.

Arrival at Camp:

Upon arrival at camp, the campers were encouraged to identify with their cabin groups, and to keep their counselor informed of their whereabouts at all times. All activities were not by cabin groups, but most of them were dependent on that structure. It provided continuous accountability. It was important for us to know where each person was most of the time. Campers were given a choice of activities during the afternoon, when a collection of interests were offered. Some were traditional, such as crafts, campcraft, music and drama, but usually we included some form of insight experience as well. Those might be discussion sessions, stimulating filmstrips or video tapes on various subjects, or any number of techniques which would help the young people lift up their thoughts, fears, attitudes or values. Newspaper, newcasting or poetry sessions were stimulating for some. Planning sessions for evening programs and vespers held the attention of others.

Evening Program:

Evening programs put people in different groups too. Interest groups in the afternoon, and the after-dinner activities were always co-educational, which made life exciting. Some evening programs used cabin structure to provide necessary organization, but usually different ones were formed. We found that planned programs for most of the day was essential. However, the one exception was two hours after dinner. It was called "free time." Softball, volleyball, ping pong, table games, or just sitting and talking were available. Toward the end of this time at teen camp, everyone moved toward the store, where records spun and nearly everyone danced or watched, and had refreshments.

Daylight prevailed for a while, which permitted field games; earth ball, parachute, treasure hunts, and the like. We tried very hard to minimize competition in all programs to reduce the pressure which we thought our boys and girls were under in their home communities.

The store was dependent on the "bank." When each camper arrived the first day the counselor received his/her finances and they were placed in the "bank." From that day no cash was kept in the cabin, and the counselors also used the "bank." Records of store purchases were kept and recorded daily, to avoid overdrafts. Limits were placed on purchases of sweets. Campers who came without funds were "loaned"

a small fund, and this was placed in their account. Most families were able to provide some resources. It was important not to be "broke" at the beginning of camp. Toward the end, everyone was low or depleted. The balance was returned to the camper just before leaving for home on the last morning.

We were not worried about being innovative with our evening programs, although we tried to build anticipation for them and keep them close to expressed interests. The rhythm and intensity of each evening was observed and planned in a way so that the excitement built during the program could taper off enough toward the end to allow emotions to calm down in preparation for sleep. We did some things routinely, such as singing taps at the close of each evening, which was a signal to everyone of what was expected in terms of behavior.

Campers enjoyed the night folk games, relays, dress-up times, scavenger hunts, special nights such as "occult," "space country," "Christmas in July," and all of the rest. This was another time for non-cabin structured groupings on a co-ed basis. At teen camp, following taps, the boys were allowed to walk the girls to their cabins. It would seem that this might be over-stimulating, but it produced the opposite effect. It provided some kind of resolve for the desire to touch, hug and kiss for most of the people. Fantacies were heard as the campers returned to their abodes. If the process was not dignified, the couples strayed from the path, or some boys

teased, pushed or shoved the girls, became aggressive or abusive with words or deeds, a warning was issued the next evening, and if that was not effective, the practice was completely discontinued for one night. Of course, staff people were always present during the "walking home" time.

Making Rules Logical:

We tried to keep the rules and the consequences logical. The reasoning we used when we asked the camper to take care of buildings and other camp equipment was to indicate to them that they were keeping it in good shape for themselves, as well as for kids just like themselves to follow in years to come. On a more imminent basis, we explained the importance of daily cabin clean-up in terms of sanitation, attractiveness and safety. We also dramatized the clean-up reports, using staff and campers to make the report funny and interesting. Canoeing, overnighting, camp-crafting and hiking rules were always carefully explained logically.

Understandably, the campers were not always ready to accept our explanations, no matter how rational, if they were at cross-purposes to what the camper wanted to do. We discovered that being flexible regarding some rules was advisable. Listening to the ideas of counselors, other staff, and especially campers, regarding rules and program additions or changes was essential. However, consistency and

fairness were goals to be firmly held throughout. When there were altercations between the campers, the counselors were requested to separate the participants and bring them to the director immediately. Naturally, not all disagreements were in this category; some could be resolved by the intervention of the counselor, but if tempers were high, blows were struck, or the trouble persisted, even in a small degree, referral was indicated. The first approach of the director or a third party was to attempt to get the "whole story" from each of the persons involved. This usually resolved the problems. Sometimes the parties involved had to be separated for a night, put into a different cabin or the staff house, told the need to change behavior immediately, given another chance, and warned of the possibility of going home, if repeated. We tried not to offer any consequences we could not put into place. If we said another instance would result in going home, we followed through.

Of the thousands of campers involved over the forty years we were camping, less than twenty had to be taken home. We worked hard at resolving conflict and feelings through the emotional stress which kept surfacing during every session. When there were alternatives and honest choices would be made, we enabled the groups to make thought-out decisions. Some behavior could not be permitted. For example, there was no choice concerning live trees -- they could not be cut down, no one could wander around camp after taps, guns were not

allowed, nor were drugs of any kind. We tried to reduce emphasis on rules, even though they were necessary. The campers learned that they were essential if our group life was to survive.

One of the important lessons camp taught was that sharing and cooperation establish community. We discovered together that by accepting some limits, more freedom was created. We also learned that life became less stressful and more creative. At some point during each session it would be appropos to call attention to the community we had established among ourselves. "We are helping each other, sharing the work, not stealing, making camp more attractive, keeping trails and other places neat, following health and safety practices, improving our social skills," and other illustrations were related to the campers to reveal how community had become a reality in our midst. We tried to show how some of this experience might transfer to their home communities.

Our experience with the young people we worked with was that they were programmed to a set of behaviors that were mostly negative, that only force was effective, there was no justice or opportunity for black people, that everyone was corrupt -- and especially white people, and on and on. Not every child accepted these programs in their entirety, but they designed, molded and structured everyone to a degree. Oh yes, there was a myth that was also programmed into their computer, simply stated, "I can do as I please."